

Come back to me

by weepingelm

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Summary: Arthur is married to a soldier but he was anxious as Merlin went of to fight in the war in Afghanistan would his fears materialise and how would they all cope. Modern A/U. Merlin/Arthur. War, Executions by decapitation, Injury, Angst.

1. Chapter 1

Arthur led in bed looking down at the raven haired man at his side, he was soaking up the sight, knowing it would be at least six months before he got to see it again. He would take a photo if it didn't seem so creepy. Worrry clenched at his gut and he just wanted to clutch Merlin to him and not let him go. Which was stupid, Merlin was a Lieutenant in the British Army who had worked his way up from the ranks and knew just what he was doing.

Arthur knew this would happen one day, but it didn't make it any easier. They had been together for two years and married for one, so he had no real reason to complain. Up to now his husband had only been away for short periods at a time. But now, later today, he was leaving to go to Afghanistan on a six month tour and it scared the hell out of the blond. He knew that a great many soldiers were seriously injured if not killed in the war and selfishly he didn't want Merlin to become one of them. Merlin had tried to reassure him, after all he had already served in Iraq, Bosnia and Kosovo in his ten years of service. But it hadn't worked Arthur would prefer it if his husband had a safer career, but he wouldn't interfere, he knew what Merlin did for a living when they first met and went in with his eyes open. But at least when in the UK the Welsh Guards were posted in London. With training trips to Salisbury Plain and the Brecon Beacons. Merlin had gone on an exercise to Germany and to Canada but this was the first War zone he had been to since they had got together.

Merlin stirred and opened his eyes and looked up see Arthur leaning on one elbow and staring at him "Hi awake already?" came the sleepy voice.

"I haven't slept well" Arthur admitted "I'm going to miss this, waking up with you next to me"

Merlin reached up and pulled Arthur down onto him "Then let's not waste time" he grinned.

An hour later they were both sitting at the breakfast bar eating a full English breakfast. Arthur insisting that Merlin eat well before they had to leave. Arthur was pushing his food round his plate hardly touching a thing. Merlin looked at him "Stop that and eat!" he glared "I need to know you will look after yourself when I'm not here."

"I'm not the stick insect" Arthur protested "It's you that's too thin" he knew that Merlin had a wiry frame that was deceptively muscular. Merlin was very fit he needed to be. Reaching across to touch Merlin on the cheek with his hand he tried to hide his concern. After all he was a Pendragon and they were made of harder stuff. "I worry without me to keep an eye on you, you will fade away"

Merlin snorted "Oh yeh! You forget I'll have Gwaine trying to mother me. He's worse than you!" Merlin smiled at the thought of his Sergeant "How the hell he keeps his Sergeant stripes I'll never know."

At first Arthur had been jealous of the Sergeant in Merlin's troop but soon learnt that the gregarious man looked on Merlin as a younger brother. He would do anything to keep Merlin safe. Even if his methods often got him in trouble with the higher ranks. But Merlin was just as loyal and fought for his friend. They were a close group and all looked after each other, Arthur had met several of them over the years. The fact that Merlin had risen through the ranks helped, he knew what his men were going through. Now Gwaine was a close friend to Arthur he trusted him to keep an eye on Merlin when he couldn't be there.

It was strange that Arthur should feel so protective of Merlin, who after all was fully able to look after himself and, the blond thought, was much braver than him. But in their personal and private life Arthur appeared to be the stronger character. Independently wealthy and the Vice President of a large multinational company Arthur had an air of leadership about him. Something Merlin liked when he was home. He led in the field with no hesitation but secretly liked the feeling of security he got from Arthur. The fact that he could let go and allow someone else to take charge. They were a well match couple.

Merlin had blossomed further due to the fact that Gays were now far more accepted in the military. When he had first joined up he had had to hide his orientation. There was still some prejudice but his commander and troop knew and were supportive

After breakfast they got in the car to drive to the barracks and say their final goodbyes. Hunith Merlin's mother, would meet them there. Arthur's sister, Morgana, was picking her up so she could see her son off. Arthur had invited her to stay with them but she insisted that the two men had time to themselves. The farewells were emotional and once Merlin was gone Arthur took Morgana and Hunith out to lunch although none of them felt like eating.

Arthur looked at his mother in law "How do you do it?" he asked

"I don't like it any more than you Arthur, I never wanted him to join up in the first place, but there was nothing for the young lads in Ealdor. Most of them joined the army. But with him being gay and having to hide his true self, it seemed the wrong choice. But it has done him good. He has so much self-confidence now, not like the timid youngster he once was. He was bullied a lot as a child, he wanted to get away" Hunith paused "At least now he hasn't got to hide his orientation, although it can still be difficult for him." she paused thinking what Merlin would have done had he met Arthur whilst homosexuality was illegal in the forces.

"I pray for him and just hope he comes home. When we lost Merlin's childhood friend Will in Iraq that was hard, I suppose that bought it home like nothing else did" Hunith hugged Arthur "We just have to believe, anyway now he has you to come home to!"

Morgana looked at her brother and Hunith "Come on Guys, Merlin wouldn't want this" she told them "At least you have Skype now, I suppose there was a time you would only have had letters"

In the following weeks and months Arthur threw himself into his work which at least pleased his father. Uther Pendragon was a hard man to please and their relationship had been strained since Arthur had come out. But at least in his own way he approved of Merlin, as much as he could of any man that was attached to his son that is. Arthur lived between one skype call and the next and the calls were always short and didn't really tell him anything. He visited his mother in law every weekend, after all he had promised Merlin he would look out for her.

But the months dragged by and Arthur's concern increased in line with the reports of injuries and deaths, so much so that he didn't watch the news for fear of what it would tell him about the fighting in Helmand. He could see the change in Merlin when they spoke and he didn't like it, he knew Merlin was trying to hide things from him, one because they couldn't discuss operational issues and also because he was trying to stop Arthur worrying. Morgana and Leon dragged him out once a fortnight for drinks, his sister refused to let him 'mope' although he knew she was also worried about Merlin. The empty side of their king size bed mocked Arthur every night and made falling asleep hard.

In Afghanistan Merlin was tired, and like all the men finding the fighting hard and brutal. The amount of men they were losing to IED (Improvised Explosive Devices) was growing. The loss of limbs and damage to the perineum's worried many of the men. So much so that many had taken to wearing tourniquets so they could be tightened quickly by their colleagues if the worse happened. The protective garments helped but even so there wasn't a troop that hadn't been hit one way or the other. The terrain made fighting extra difficult as was the heat. But they had one month left before they were due to fly home. Every day was now being counted. Now Merlin was a married man he also had to cope with the loneliness of not being with Arthur. Something when he had had to keep his homosexuality secret hadn't been an issue. Then home was for partying and drinking and visiting his mother.

One morning Merlin called his men together they were to take a chinook to an area that needed reinforcements. He found Gwaine and got him to round up the remaining men, they were a good team and Merlin knew them all well. He had been devastated when David had been killed a couple of weeks previously. The man had two small children. That was the trouble with working and living so close together it made any loss or injury that much more difficult to accept. Having come up through the ranks Merlin was even closer to his men than normal, he always said cut one of them and they all bled.

As they flew towards the drop area Merlin gave his men their orders and they made sure they were ready to exit the helicopter and hit the ground running. The Taliban was making life difficult in this area for the local civilians and it was hoped with the reinforcements they could push them back from the village before nightfall. As they headed towards the landing area they were fired on by land to air missiles and hit. The pilot did his best to control their descent but they hit the ground hard, even though he had been flying low. They were still several miles from where they were supposed to be. Dazed and not sure where he was hurting Merlin looked at his men. He could see Gwaine and a couple of the other men were up on their feet and checking the rest of the troop. Then his friend helped him to his feet

2. Chapter 2

As Merlin stood up Gwaine looked at him as if to check him out. "Come on Merl we need to get out of here" Gwaine sounded concerned as he looked at the devastation around them "There is only six men left who can move, the rest are either too badly injured, dead or soon will be"

Merlin shook his head "I'm not leaving the injured"

"We can't do anything! The enemy will be on us before we know it" Gwaine hated the thought of leaving the men as well but could see no alternative "Pellinore has got off a mayday. We will have air cover soon but we need to get in a better position."

"Then you lot go, I'll stay here and try to give you time" Merlin said resolutely

"You have to be joking right?" Gwaine snarled "We all go or none of us"

Merlin's tone of voice changed it was clear he would tolerate no objections "I've given you an order Sergeant, leave me the mortar and get the walking wounded out of here" Merlin looked at his friend "Don't be a fool they need you"

Pellinore shouted out "Too late we can't go anywhere" he pointed at a large number of Taliban soldiers arriving in an assortment of trucks from two directions.

Gwaine looked out of the shell of the crashed chinook "Fuck" was all he said as he aimed his rifle.

"Get down men, take what shelter you can." Merlin moved stiffly to a better position and looked out before turning to his friend "It's

been a pleasure knowing you my friend"

Gwaine grimaced "Same here, let's take as many of the bastards as we can down with us"

Pellinore had finished giving details over the radio and stood at Merlin's other side ready to shoot or give directions over the radio if help arrived in time. The other men, even some of the injured found a place to shoot from and waited. Merlin looked at them "Make every shot count men, I am proud to serve with you all"

Back in London Arthur had arrived back home after a long day at the office, he had recently started work every morning at seven thirty so he could make sure he kept everything up together so when Merlin come home he could take time off to be with him. It was a Friday night and he knew Hunith would already be in the house as she had come to London for the weekend. Merlin's mother wanted to do some Christmas shopping and was planning on spending a couple of days out with Morgana. He knew both women were determined to have a good celebration since Merlin would be back in time. Arthur smiled at the thought of seeing Hunith because he knew she would have cooked him a hot meal. After he and Merlin had started to date Hunith had soon become like a mother to the blonde, something that until he had met Merlin he had never experienced. He knew his sister felt the same way as she was drawn into Hunith's net. The woman seemed to have an endless supply of love. At least, Arthur thought happily he wouldn't be coming back to an empty house. He was also looking forward to hopefully having a skype call from Merlin later that evening. They managed a couple of times a week usually, it wasn't enough but Arthur knew how lucky he was to get that.

As soon as he opened his front door he was met by delicious smells of cooking. "That smells great Hunith" he called out

"Thank you dear boy, I hope you don't mind but I have invited Morgana and Leon over, it's so long since I have seen either of them. I know I am shopping with Morgana tomorrow" Hunith turned to Arthur as he walked into the kitchen. She had a slightly worried expression.

Arthur smiled "You can invite whoever you like if I get to have food cooked by you! Anyway I have told you I don't know how many times you are to treat this house as your own."

"I know you have Arthur" Hunith kissed his cheek "You are a good man and Merlin is lucky to have you"

"Not as lucky as I am to have himâ€¦only don't tell him that!" Arthur told Hunith.

"Oh I think he knows what you feel for him"

"The last couple of weeks are going to drag, I don't know how you cope with it" Arthur said not for the first time.

"You have to remember Merlin hasn't lived with me since he joined up at 17. So I don't feel it as acutely as you do" Hunith admitted. "I've had ten years to get used to it. But I do worry when he's in a war zone" her face fell as she thought of her son. "He is such a gentle soul it's hard to think of him shooting at people. I know he

does butâ€¦|."

"I know what you mean. But he is immensely loyal and protective and I suppose that's how he does it." Arthur admitted. "I hope we can talk to him later"

Arthur had always had trouble picturing the kind and gentle man he knew with his occupation. In fact when they had met he seriously thought Merlin was having him on. He was sure he was a primary school teacher or a doctor.

It would be an hour before Arthur's sister and her husband Leon arrived so Arthur went to have a shower and change. Then he sat with Hunith and watched the six o'clock news as she liked to. It bulletin started with breaking news from Afghanistan. The reporter said "A chinook helicopter full of troops had been shot down by the Taliban, Full details have yet to be released but we will keep you up to date as soon as information becomes available. It has been reported that there are casualties, but numbers have yet to be confirmed."

Hunith and Arthur looked at each other, neither willing to say anything. The news then continued with other matters. Before the news finished Morgana and Leon arrived so Arthur switched the television off. They were soon sat down in the dining room tucking into a delicious meal when the doorbell rang. Arthur frowned but got up and went through to answer the door, half expecting one of his neighbours. As he opened the door he saw a man and woman in uniform. Arthur's heart dropped and he sagged even before they said anything.

"Mr Arthur Pendragon?" the man asked

"Yes" Arthur forced out, his chest tight and heart pounding.

"My name is John Brown and this is Mary Collins we have some news about your husband. May we come in?"

3. Chapter 3

As Arthur stepped back from the door he knew he was shaking, once the couple were inside John spoke once more "First thing I need to say is we have NOT come to tell you your husband is deceased. Look can we get you sat down somewhere and we can discuss this calmly, do you have any one you would like us to call to be with you?"

Arthur hardly took in what they said, but he did pick up on the last sentence. "My sister is here, and Hunith, Merlin's motherâ€¦.oh my god Merlin's mother" thinking immediately how she would take any bad news.

Mary took Arthur's arm and led him through the door into the sitting room. Looking around and seeing the room empty John asked "Where are they? Shall I get them?"

Arthur shook himself "I'll get them" with that he went to the dining room.

As he walked in Morgana said "We wondered who it was I was just going to come and get you" with that she looked at her brother and

immediately sensed something was wrong, her brother looked pale and in shock.

Arthur looked at Hunith "It's the army" he said "I think its bad news"

His knees started to give way as Hunith gasped and put her hand to her mouth. Morgana was immediately all action "Where are they?" she demanded

Mary and John had followed Arthur John looked at the family "We have already told Mr Pendragon that we are Not here with totally bad news. Look can we find somewhere to sit and we will tell you what we know."

Morgana helped her brother to the living room and sat down as Leon walked with the shaking Hunith. Once they were sat on the long sofa together Morgana, Arthur, and Hunith for mutual support with Leon sitting on an armchair. John looked at Arthur from the chair opposite.

"As I said we have come with news of your husband, as far as we know he is alive. He and his troop were on the chinook that crashed earlier today after being hit by enemy fire, you may have heard the news. When the rescue helicopters arrived they found the dead and injured but six men were missing. One of whom was Lieutenant Emrys. Despite an extensive search, which is still going on they have not been found." John let what he said sink in before continuing. "The information given to us from the injured, after they were rescued, point to them being taken prisoner by the Taliban" he paused "They have not yet contacted us, although they have claimed responsibility for the shooting down of the helicopter"

He looked at the people in front of him with sympathy "You will of course be kept informed at all stages"

Arthur had his head in his hands but looked up his eyes hard "What action will be taken to get my husband and the others back safely?"

"As we have told you a search is still in progress, Satellite photos are being studied, you may rest assured everything that can be done is being done." Mary reiterated.

Hunith looked at the couple "They will be killed won't they?" her voice breaking "Who else is missing, I know a lot of the boys is Gwaine safe?"

"I'm sorry Mrs Emrys at the moment because other families are being informed I cannot go into details" John said with sympathy.

Hunith snapped back and she snapped angrily, something very rare for her "It's Ms Emrys if you don't mind, and Gwaine Green made me his next of kin when his own mother passed on, he is like a second son to me" Hunith said

Mary stood up and went outside, went outside and got on the phone immediately to check details, coming back quickly she said "I'm sorry Ms Emrys, we thought you were at your home address and weren't aware of your next of kin status as someone else was dealing with Sergeant

Green. I understand they went there to tell you." She paused before saying with sympathy "Sergeant Green is also missing"

Morgana put her hand on her brother's arm. "He's not dead Arthur, and until you hear otherwise you have to hold on to that. Merlin is a survivor you know that"

Arthur put his arm round Hunith who turned and cried on his shoulder. She was worried sick for both of her boys.

"What happens now" Morgana asked as Arthur and Hunith were clearly and understandably in shock, she hadn't noticed that Leon had gone off to make tea.

Mary continued to explain "Tomorrow you will be contacted by your assigned Visiting Officer who will liaise between you and the army, keeping you abreast of any developments. He will also help with any advice or help you require. I have been told you will be seen by Lance De Luc. We will ensure he is updated on information regarding Sergeant Green as well."

At that Leon arrived with a tray of tea and after making sure everyone had a cup he sat down to listen and take in all that was said, knowing full well that neither Arthur or Hunith were in a fit state to do so. It was over an hour before they left leaving a distraught family behind them. After all no one was in any doubt that for anyone captured by the Taliban the outlook was not great. The Governments position was clear no deals would or could be made for release.

The men in the wreckage of the chinook had soon been overrun by the Taliban fighters. There were just too many of them and Merlin had so few men capable of fighting back. Despite a valiant effort they were surrounded, having very little shelter from which to fight. As the fighting became close quarters it was soon all over, Except for the badly wounded there were only six men left standing, none of whom wanted to surrender, but to save their fellow soldiers Merlin was given no choice. It was either that or be shot down in cold blood. Whilst they were alive they would always have a chance to escape. The leader promised that if they threw down their arms they would leave the badly injured alone to be rescued and that swung it for Merlin. There were fourteen injured at least maybe more. Six men in exchange was an acceptable, if high, price to pay. They were immediately disarmed, tied up and made to get into one of the vans. Merlin was pleased to see Gwaine, Galahad, Pellinore, Mordred and Terry were uninjured and except for their battered pride and a few minor injuries, they were all apparently well. They were taken to a camp in the mountains and thrown in a cave. The leader told them they would be held for exchange for some of their own captured men.

The following days were soul destroying for Arthur and Hunith, Merlin's mother had accepted Arthur's offer to stay in London, that way they could at least support one another. The following morning Lance De Luc arrived as promised and gave what support he could. He was a kind and pleasant man about the same age as Arthur. But without news there was only so much he could do. The couple were in limbo not knowing if Merlin, and Gwaine for that matter, were alive or dead. After three days Arthur returned to work. Morgana kept Hunith Company during the day. Arthur felt he had to do something or he would crack up, all he could do was imagine what his husband was going through.

It had to be said he wasn't much better at work and his father although initially sympathetic, as much as he could be, was soon losing patience with his son.

On the third day after their capture came confirmation that the Taliban did indeed have the missing men. The news was broken to Arthur and Hunith by Lance. It seemed the Taliban announced the men's capture by sending a film of the execution by decapitation of one of the men. Arthur's first thought was to be thankful it wasn't Merlin, then he immediately felt guilty as it was someone's family member.

"Look the M.O.D has arranged a meeting for all the relatives tomorrow to update you all, can you come? The army will send transport" Lance asked, "They will answer what questions they can"

"Of course when and where?" Arthur said without thought, Hunith nodding her agreement, he wanted to know exactly what was being done and by whom. One of the worse things Arthur found was not being in control, not knowing everything that was happening. Give him a problem and he would work towards solving it, but he had no informationâ€¦nothing. He felt totally impotent for the first time in his life and he didn't like it.

Lance ignored the snap in Arthur's voice he understood what the other man was going through. "At the MOD offices in Whitehall 10am"

"We'll be there" Arthur said without hesitation.

"Good, hopefully by then we might have more news" Lance made the arrangements before leaving.

Hunith agreed with Arthur that she wanted to go as well, she was worried sick about her son and Gwaine. Since hearing the news about the decapitation she was finding it hard to cope. Both of them had disturbed dreams. Arthur dreamt that he had woken to find Merlin's severed head on the pillow beside him. After that he didn't sleep he couldn't shake the thoughts going through his head.

When they arrived at the Ministry it was the first time they realised who else was involved. Everyone looked like they had had as much sleep as Arthur and Hunith. As well as Merlin and Gwaine the captured were: Pellinore Drew, Galahad Jones and Terry Davis. Mr Drew told them it was Mordred Evans who had died, she had spoken to his mother who was a good friend and neighbour. It seemed that Mordred's family didn't mind them knowing but didn't want the name leaked to the press while their grief was still so fresh. Arthur knew Mordred's name but had never met him, but he did know he was one of the younger men. Merlin had said he showed great promise. Of the others he had met them all at one time or another but it was Gwaine he knew best. The troop was like a second family to Merlin had so Arthur by default had been drawn into the group.

They were waiting in a small room to see both the Minister of Defence and one of the army Generals and started to get to know one another, after all they all realised they would rely on each other for support until they were reunited with their loved ones. When Arthur introduced himself as Merlin's husband Mr Davis became agitated "You mean my son's officer is a poof, is that allowed!"

Arthur held his temper, with difficulty after all he was used to his own father's reaction, knowing that this was a highly emotional time for everyone. "Yes it is, my husband informed his senior officers years ago of his orientation. Before it was legal in the forces he denied himself a normal life refusing to acknowledge it even to himself. Thank goodness such things are no longer necessary. It has never effected his ability to do his job"

Hunith glared at the man "My son is as much a man as anyone. He has worked his way up through the ranks to get where he has, all of his men know, it's no secret. In fact all the missing men went to the wedding, with the exception of poor Mordred, he is newer. If it's good enough for your son it should be for you!"

Mrs Drew spoke next she clearly knew Mr Davis "Shut up Taffy, don't be an idiot. He's a good man, my Pellinore says he's the best and looks after his men, so who cares what he does in his own time?"

"Yeh well he looked after um well this time didn't he? Over half the troop dead and our boys captured" Taffy Davis spat out "That sort of thing ain't god fearing"

Arthur looked at the other man hardly believing what the man had said. "You say god fearing, well nor is killing, but our men are soldiers if you think about it, so stuff your god fearing ways"

Lance stepped in "Look ladies and gentlemen now is not the time for this" he looked at Taffy Davis "Sir your remarks are offensive and I'm sure if you weren't stressed you would see that, so let's calm it down and support each other, you are all in a similar situation."

Luckily they were then called into the office where they were updated. It seemed the men's position had still not been pinpointed but the Taliban had given proof that the remaining five men were still alive and well.

"We continue to follow all intelligence. Private Evans body has been retrieved and is being flown home. The Taliban have yet to give us their demands for the release of the five remaining men but it is expected they will ask for a ransom" the Minister paused "You need to understand it is Her Majesties Governments policy not to give in to terrorists in this way. It would send a dangerous message and make all the men stationed in war zones a target. But everything is being done to find them"

Arthur understood the reasoning and had in the past supported it but now found himself willing to do anything for Merlin and the other men's release. "Then I'll personally pay it" he said bluntly

"What do you mean Sir?" the Minister asked

"It should be clear. Look I am independently wealthy I will pay any ransom! That way the government's stance remains and we get our men back" Arthur said

"Mr Pendragon I do understand what you're going through and I am sure if I was in a similar position I might well make the same offer, but

it won't be approved" the politician said sympathetically

"No you bloody don't! That's my husband and his friends out there. One has already had his head cut off! I won't stand by and see the same happen to them, not if I can do anything to stop it. I don't care if it takes every penny I have" Arthur's voice rose in volume. "Other countries allow it. In fact other governments pay the ransoms, are our soldiers worth less?"

"No they are not! You know that" The general said calmly "If ransoms are paid it make more families go through the same thing and pays for arms that kill even more. Look everything that can be is being done" he paused "Do you think Merlin and the others would want their release at the cost of that?"

"That's alright for you, you have the money, what about our boys?" Taffy snarled

Hunith turned on the man "Why don't you listen you fool! My son in law said he would pay all their ransoms!"

Taffy looked abashed as Arthur told him "I am independently wealthy as well as Vice President of a large Multinational company." Looking at the General he added "We have a branch in France and I know they have paid ransoms for their nationals I will go through them if it makes you feel better. I don't care if it costs every penny I have I want my husband and his men back"

The General looked at Arthur "Look son let us try our way first, I want those boys back as much as you, but paying them isn't the way to do it, and as yet we don't have their demands. I have men waiting to go in for a rescue when we find them. I and the rest of the forces won't rest until we have them back. Private Evan's death was a show killing to make sure we took this seriously. We won't lose anyone else if there is any way we can stop it."

They all left the meeting feeling no further forward. Galahad's sister thanked Arthur for trying to help "I hope they find them, my brother is the only family I have"

Arthur looked at her and said "You have us now no matter what happens."

They knew that they would have to wait for developments. Arthur wasn't prepared for that, he had the bit between his teeth and wanted some guarantees so as soon as he got home he contacted the Prime Minister's office direct. His family name was enough to get an appointment with the PM for two days' time.

4. Chapter 4

They had been captive for just over a day, they were left tied up hands and feet and their hands were released when they were fed. Even if they had only one meal that day and none the previous, although they had been given water. When they wanted to go to the toilet they were taken to a special area one at a time. That was the only time their feet were free. Their details had been taken from their identification tags as soon as they had arrived at the cave.

The leader had arrived and spoke to Merlin alone in surprisingly good English even if it was heavily accented and broken. "We are asking for release of our men held by the coalition in exchange for you. Behave and you will be treated well. You are brave fighters. But to make sure they understand that we are not to be messed with we execute one of your men."

Merlin was appalled "Then make it me" he said "They are my men, my responsibility, I will volunteer"

The leader gave Merlin a toothy grin "You Officer, no we keep you, but you can select your man, you have honour, have hour" with that he pushed Merlin back in with the others.

Merlin was stunned there was no way he would condemn one of his men to death. He didn't answer the questions the others threw at him. In the end Gwaine was asked by the others to talk to Merlin "What's up mate? What did they want?"

Even in the semi darkness of the cave Gwaine could see real anguish in his almost brothers eyes. After some coaxing Merlin winced "They are going to kill one of you! They want me to choose who. I can't do it. I asked them to take me but they wouldn't"

Gwaine grimaced "Then choose me mate. Pellinore has kids, Mordred ain't much more than a kid himself, Galahad's sister relies in him and they have already lost everyone else. As for Terry he's an only child. Me I have no one but you and your mum and I'll probably drink myself to an early grave anyway."

"Gwaine you're my brother I can't, I won't choose any of you, they can't make me. I have to make them take me" Merlin said his voice becoming firmer and more resolute.

"Fuck Merlin don't be daft, you are the one that will get them through this, and I'm damned if I am going back to tell Arthur what happenedâ€¦.or your mum. I promised them both I'd look out for you" Gwaine couldn't bear the thought of Merlin being killed, not like this.

"Gwaine I don't need looking after! And you have no choice, I am the officer here and it's my job to look after all of you. I have already lost to many men I won't lose one more" Merlin said adamantly. Then he fell into silence and Gwaine sat by him offering silent support.

When the leader came again he looked at Merlin "Who"

Merlin stood to his full height wobbling slightly due to his bound wrists, ankles and hunger "Me"

The leader looked at him with respect "You are brave man, but no" he looked at the others as if calculating. Gwaine had got up when Merlin did, he moved forward "Then me"

"No, you second command, no we take him" he pointed to Mordred. Then looked at Mordred "You die soon, make your peace with your god" with that he walked out.

Mordred looked fearfully at Merlin who explained "He asked me to

choose someone I said I would go, but he wouldn't let me. I am sorry Mordred I will do my best to make them take me."

Mordred surprised them all, as the others protested and offered themselves, the young man said "I don't want to die, but if I must I will, can you tell my parents I died bravely and quickly, no matter what the truth"

When the leader came back and took Mordred another man grabbed Merlin and snarled "You watch, brave man die See how merciful we are"

The two men were dragged out into the open where they were surrounded by Taliban soldiers. Mordred looked at Merlin "Thank you Sir, it's been an honour to serve with you" then he was pushed roughly to his knees and his head pushed down.

Merlin struggled but knew it was in vain so instead he said to the young man "It I that am honoured. Your bravery will be acknowledged and I will make sure your family are looked after"

Mordred had thought he was going to be shot. He didn't see what Merlin did. A man approached and Merlin realised what he was about to witness. The leader who was at Merlin's side said "Watch your man die a brave death. If you had not come to our country he would have lived to old age with his grandchildren round him. Do not disgrace him by turning away, let him know you stood by him"

The beheading was quick but something that would stay with Merlin and haunt him. He noticed someone filming the execution on a mobile phone and winced. There was much cheering amid the fighters as Mordred's head was held aloft. The others were brought out the cave and loaded onto a truck. Merlin was put with them. All the men saw Mordred's head, which had been put at the side of the road on a pile of stones. They were then driven off to a new hideout. Merlin was sick to the stomach and dreading what the future would bring for his men. Gwaine and his men left him alone to compose himself the best he could, none of them really believing what had just happened. Gwaine knew that Merlin would be blaming himself.

After the family meeting the evening news announced of the capture of the men, and the next day it was in the newspapers, although no names were released. The fatalities of the crash were also revealed it was the largest single amount of British dead since the start of the war in one incident, and Arthur and the other relatives couldn't escape seeing about the details as they were everywhere. It wasn't long before the captured men's names were leaked to the press. Arthur was asked to speak to the press but refused, he saw no benefit in doing so. Either for himself or the men concerned. It did make his life harder as anyone who knew him seemed to think they had the right to ask him questions. Once it was realised that Merlin was married to one of the country's richest men and also gay the press seemed to concentrate on Arthur and Merlin. This at least gave the others some respite.

Morgana and Leon shielded Arthur as much as they could and he got a separate phone and new number for the army and select friends, and didn't answer his other one. Gwen his PA became extra protective of her boss and stopped unwanted callers to the office. Uther was less sympathetic "You both knew the risks, a soldier's life can be a dangerous one." He had clearly heard of his son's offer "Don't be a

fool over any ransom, we can't be seen to be weak. You both knew what he was getting into. However I am less than happy about the publicity your relationship is attracting to the firm. We deal with conservative people and this 'relationship' of yours will not help the image of the company"

Arthur walked away from his father without answering him, even though he wanted to punch the man. He was very close to giving in his notice, but knew this was not a good time to make such an important decision. Anyway he also knew that the clout he had a VP of Camelot was far higher than if he were just an individual, no matter how wealthy.

By the time of Arthur's meeting with the PM another soldier had been executed by the Taliban, this time it was reported on the main news. Pellinore Drew was dead leaving a widow and two children as orphans. Now there were only four prisoners left. There seemed to be an inevitability that this would continue. The PM Bayard Mercia was sympathetic but Arthur saw through the facade the man was a professional politician, Arthur had no doubt that the man wanted the situation dealt with but he had a strong feeling that it wasn't for the same reasons the relatives did. This was clearly something that the government didn't want dragging out, as there was already a strong public opinion growing against meddling in foreign countries no matter what the reasoning.

Bayard told Arthur that they had received the demands and it was for a prisoner exchange, but that the men in question were in Guantanamo Bay and were near the top of the Taliban's chain of command and high profile prisoners. Both the USA and the UK governments were very reluctant to consider the exchange. Arthur hiding his distress at the news asked if they would consider a cash payment. This was immediately put down "We cannot be seen to be giving in to terrorism in this way" the PM said

Arthur wasn't to be silenced "My Company has a large base in both the USA and UK we play a large part in the economy of both countries I must insist that everything must be done to help these men, who after all were sent to Afghanistan by the two governments, surely you owe them a duty of care!" He hesitated "I can go through a different government and will do if that's what it takes" Arthur hated using his family name and power for personal reasons but he would do anything it took to save Merlin.

The PM looked at Arthur "This may sound harsh and insensitive but we have every reason to believe your husband is safe for now, as the officer he is the Taliban's highest card. The two already dead were Privates. It is highly likely he will be kept alive the longest"

"You have to be joking! So I turn my back on the others! You are unbelievable" Arthur stood up and walked to the window twisting his wedding ring round and round on his finger. "I want something done, or I will, do it myself."

"This is not to go out of this room for obvious reasons but we have a crack team of SAS waiting for the smallest chance and they will launch a rescue attempt. If you start offering money it will only make our job harder." Bayard told Arthur "I understand intelligence is coming in all the time, you have to give us chance to do it our

way. It has not even been a week yet. Also you need to consider all the other troops stationed out there who don't have relatives who could fund a multimillion pound ransom, because have no doubt that's what they will demand if you ask them, although I suspect they will turn you down anyway. They want their men back" he looked at Arthur this time with more genuine sympathy "I'm sorry I truly am but your husband knew what the risks were when he signed up, and if he were here I'm sure he would agree paying these people is not the answer. He wouldn't want his rescue to endanger the rest of the army."

"Maybe not but he wouldn't have expected to just be left either, he wouldn't have left any of his men" Arthur felt helpless. The meeting had not gone as he had hoped, but in reality he wasn't sure what else anyone could do. His rational mind accepted the PM's comments even if emotionally he couldn't. After all what was the use of all his millions if he couldn't use any of the money to save the person who meant the most to him. If Merlin got out of this alive Arthur intended to talk him into leaving the army and never leaving his side again.

5. Chapter 5

In Afghanistan somewhere in the mountains the second execution had followed much the same procedure as before. Merlin was desperate to not allow a second man to die, so when asked to select a man he pleaded to be chosen and was again ignored. Once again the Taliban leader made his own selection and once again Merlin went with Pellinore to the execution and stood by his friend and fellow soldier. Unlike Mordred Pellinore knew what to expect. They had all seen Mordred's body. Merlin would not have his man die without a friend nearby to support him on his last journey. Pellinore looked Merlin in the eye, clearly frightened but composed by the inevitability, Merlin was impressed by his composure and wasn't sure he could have face death so easily.

Pellinore looked at his officer "Thank you Sir for being here. It will be quicker than an IED, Don't blame yourself you did all you could. Can you tell my wife and kids I loved them and thought of them as I died, and I am sorry to leave them" He sounded almost resigned to his fate. "You know she wanted me to resign once we had kids. I should have listened to her."

"I will tell her myself if I get back. We will look after them for you." Merlin said making sure his voice as steady, it was the best he could do. He wasn't sure he would be able to keep the promise, but he also knew Arthur would help the families. As he thought of his husband Merlin felt close to breaking, how was he coping with the situation back home? By now Merlin knew that all the men believed it was unlikely that any of them would be saved. For all they all knew their Countries stance on such things. Merlin refused to take his eyes of the brave man even as he was forced to his knees.

This time the executioner was a young man, full of hatred for the army who had come to his country. Merlin thought he was about eighteen. The young had less power and was clearly less practiced, it took three blows to separate the head. Merlin had a hard time not to throw up at the sight, he held his head high, and he hoped that at least that after the first blow Pellinore knew nothing, but he

couldn't be sure.

Once more straight after the execution they were loaded into a truck and moved. And again they saw the head of their colleague on display. Merlin hadn't told the others of the messy execution, after all they may yet all face the same, and he felt it better they believed it quick. That night once they were left in their new cell for the night the men started to try and plan their escape, something they had started as soon as they were captured, since Mordred they had decided better to die trying something than being led like lambs to the slaughter. But they all realised it was very unlikely they would succeed, and all they could do was wait and watch and hope someone made a mistake. The moral was at its lowest point and even Gwaine's normally unstoppable good humour was absent.

Two days after his death Mordred Evan's body arrived in England. Arthur and Hunith both went to Wootton Bassett and paid their respects as the cortege passed through the town. They felt it was the least they could do. Arthur had already told Lance to make sure the family had all the support they required, both now and later, he would pay any costs to the family.

Five days later was the funeral which Arthur and Hunith attended, it pushed Arthur over the edge and he broke down completely and could no longer face leaving their home. He refused to even get out of bed, no matter what anyone tried. All he could think of was Merlin and the danger he was in and how he might never see him again. It wasn't until he saw Hunith and how it was affecting her that he managed to even eat. He knew he had to try to be strong for her, no matter how hard he found it. He owed that to Merlin if nothing else. The blonde knew how protective Merlin was of his mother. They leant on each other and together somehow got through each day.

The next two weeks got even harder, Lance visited daily and explained that contact was being kept up with the Taliban to put pressure on for the men's release. But they knew that the Government would not back down on their stance. Then it was Pellinore Drew's arrival and funeral, again Arthur and Hunith attended out of solidarity, but it once more emphasised just how precarious the remaining men's situation was. Arthur and Hunith had regular nightmares and found sleeping difficult. They did keep in contact with the other families through Lance, but Arthur knew they were all in the same boat and fearing that the next fatality would be of their loved one. Arthur had given up all pretence of going to work, he had neither the interest nor inclination. Although Morgana tried to get him to do something to help take his mind, even briefly, from what was happening so far away.

In Afghanistan the men were moved every few days and felt each extra day they were all alive was a bonus. Captivity was beginning to wear on them all, losing the others had heightened their feelings of mortality. Galahad had made one break for freedom when being taken to relieve himself but hadn't got many feet before being brought down. They felt it was like they were being played with. Galahad was beaten as punishment and was black and blue. When the leader arrived and spoke to Merlin and the men warning them that they wouldn't hesitate to kill if anyone tried again.

Merlin snorted in disbelief. "You are going to kill us one by one anyway. It is our duty to try to escape."

The leader looked at Merlin with contempt then looking at the other three he said something to his men, guns were pointed at the others as Merlin was grabbed and forced to the floor face down. He was held down and his arms released. For a moment both Merlin and the others thought he was going to be killed but the leader glared at Gwaine, Galahad and Terry

"You try to escape again, you be beaten, but your officer have his right hand cut off. This time we spare him but you need to understand." With that he nodded to two of his men who started to flog Merlin with a five inch leather strap called a dura.

Merlin bit the inside of his cheek to stop himself crying out. His thin shirt doing nothing to stop the pain as the dura hit him again and again. This continued for some time as a hundred lashes were given. Whilst the flogging took place Gwaine cursed them with such a vocabulary that the other men had almost been impressed. When the punishment stopped the leader spoke once more "Remember next time worse."

With that he ordered Merlin's arms tied once more and they left the room. Immediately the other three approached Merlin, with their hands behind their backs there was little they could do. Gwaine sank down beside Merlin and looked at his back, the shirt now shreds. Merlin's back and buttocks red and would clearly be covered in bruising later, luckily he only had a few broken areas of skin. Gwaine gently eased himself under Merlin's head so his officer was resting on his lap and out of the dust. At some stage Merlin had lost consciousness and Gwaine let him be knowing he would be in pain once he woke.

Afterwards Merlin once he had woken and recovered sufficiently to speak he ordered them to take whatever chances they could, even if it meant just one person survived. "Don't listen to their threats against me, we need to make sure some if not all of us survive. I will gladly lose a hand if it means one of you gets home." He paused then added "Better a hand than a head"

The captives were becoming weaker through lack of food and exercise, although they did their best to stay fit, even though they remained tied. Their clothes were now practically rags and stank as they still had not been given the chance to wash. They all had facial hair and all the men felt slovenly and that did not help the moral. Having once Merlin had recovered sufficiently he offered as much encouragement as he could and they continued to invent games to keep themselves occupied they also watched carefully for any weakness in the enemy.

When the day the men had been due home arrived Morgana made sure she would be with Arthur and Hunith for the day. Both had lost weight with the worry and she was worried for both of them. Unfortunately Uther was getting impatient with his son. And chose that day to arrive at the house to lecture his son on his responsibilities. He arrived at eight in the morning on his way to work. Hunith hadn't got up, having not fallen asleep until the early hours. Arthur was drinking his first tea of the morning when the elder Pendragon knocked on the door. Arthur opened it thinking it was Morgana and that she had forgotten her key. He saw his father and stepped back to let him in. Walking into the living room not even looking to see if

Uther followed. Arthur had dressed that morning, but in joggers and a t shirt and had not shaved for a couple of days.

As Arthur plonked himself down in Merlin's favourite chair he looked up at his father. "What do you what?" he asked not really caring but knowing from his father's demeanour it wouldn't be good.

Uther's lips pursed at his son's tone "I am you father, speak with more respect" not getting a reaction he continued "Look at you! You are a disgrace, go and clean yourself up put on a suit and tie and then get to work. I am speaking as your employer as well as your father when I say you need to pull yourself together you have responsibilities and cannot expect your co-workers to continue to carry you."

Still not getting a response he continued his voice impatient and scathing "Arthur you cannot carry on this way, he knew what the risks were and so did you, now face up to it like a man. Get on with your life and stop acting like a child!"

Arthur hit the coffee table and stood up glaring at his father "I cannot believe you! My husband, the love of my life is being held by the Taliban, two of his men have had their heads cut off and you have the audacity to come here on the day he was due home and lecture me on responsibility. Merlin was fighting on his countries behalf when he was taken, he wasn't on some bloody holiday!" Arthur stood facing his father his voice bitter "My husbandâ€¦ yes that's right MY HUSBAND is missing, and I don't know when, or if, I will ever see him alive again. Well let me tell you, you can stuff your job if that's how you feel, now get out of our house" by now he was shouting angrily. All his bottled up grief and anger boiling over at the man in front of him. In that moment he hated his father more than he ever had.

Uther looked at Arthur as if he had grown two heads "This isn't you Arthur, don't be a fool. Keep your mind busy, how do you think I coped when your mother died? I couldn't wallow in self-pity." Uther's voice became harder and unfeeling "He isn't even dead, and even if he is you need to take a good look at yourself. It isn't worth throwing your life away just because your paramour is gone."

"HEâ€¦. HASâ€¦.. Aâ€¦. NAME!" Arthur spat out bullet style "You can't even say it can you?! MERLIN that's my Husband's name, now use it." Arthur spat out "And don't lie to me, you have wallowed in self-pity since mother died. Not even giving your own children your time or love. You buried yourself in work as if that was all that mattered, now you won't even allow me toâ€¦."

Arthur stopped talking, he wouldn't use the word grieve. Merlin was Not dead, he wasn't, he couldn't think that. Arthur was about to speak again when Hunith came into the room, She looked at the two men then with her hand on Arthur's shoulder and she looked at Uther. She was a small woman and even frailer with her recent weight loss, but she would not be intimidated by the man in front of her. Stepping directly in front of him and between Uther and his son she spoke calmly but with force.

"Arthur is like a son to me and I won't have him spoken to like that, not even by you! I have heard a great deal about you Mr Pendragon, and I pity you. I gained a son when Merlin and Arthur married yet you lost the only one you had. You wouldn't even come to their wedding. I

too lost my man, before Merlin was born, but I gave all my love to my son, and it has been repaid a thousand fold. The fact that our two boys love each other and have found a soulmate in each other is wonderful and not something to be ashamed of. Now my Merlin is missing and Arthur needs support not thisâ€¦.so I think you best leave"

None of them had heard the front door open once more so were surprised when another voice spoke. "And I agree, leave now Uther or by god I will never talk to you again!" Morgana stood there her green eyes flashing in anger.

"How dare you, and today of all days. What's more Arthur has two weeks holiday booked from yesterday so he shouldn't even be at work. As for cover Leon and Gwen have been managing, nothing has suffered and even if it had your son and his husband should come first. Arthur had put in so many hours before all this happened to make sure things were up together. Your attitude disgusts me!"

Uther looked at the two women and then spoke to his son ignoring the two women "Sort yourself out Arthur, this is no way for a Pendragon to behave" with that he was gone.

Morgana shouted after him "Then I thank god I am a La Fey!"

She turned round to her brother who was shaking and hugged him.

"How could he?" he murmured

"Because he's an unfeeling bastard" Morgana told her brother.

The three of them sat together hugging until eventually Hunith pulled away "Come on you two we should at least try to eat something. I'll make us all a cup of tea and some toast."

Arthur couldn't help but give a small broken smile as he heard Hunith. Merlin always said his mother thought everything could be solved with a cup of tea.

End
file.